

SCHRIKBEELDEN





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SCHRIKBEELDEN

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Op de omslag van het themanummer een fragment van het stilleven 'Is, was, komt' [2016] van fotograaf Dik Nicolai (c), speciaal voor dit themanummer over SCHRIKBEELDEN gemaakt (bijdrage 19).

OUR ABIDING FEAR OF THE NEW



Computer games and controversy

Connie Veugen

Even though these claims have been disproven in many studies on the subject, 2015 saw the return of anti-games arguments and/or unsubstantiated claims about the negative effects of games and game violence on the human psyche. In this article, I want to argue that fear of the new often causes such claims, looking especially at previous controversies related to computer games to show that histoire se répète.

In 2015, computer games were once again the subject of controversy. In the book *(Man) Disconnected: How technology has sabotaged what it means to be male*, authors Nikita D. Coulombe and Philip Zimbardo (known for his 1971 Stanford prison experiment) name excessive gaming as one of the causes for the poor performance of boys in school, putting them at a disadvantage compared to girls. Immediately gamers and game researchers reacted to point out that the assumption that gamers only consist of pubescent and adolescent males has long since been disproven.

Already in 2008 a survey amongst the Dutch population showed that in the age groups 13-19 and 20-34 the number of males playing computer games compared to the number of females playing did not differ that much: 97% male vs 88% for the 13-19 category and 89% male vs 81% female for the 20-34 category (Hautvast, et al., 2008).¹ Others, for instance Andrew Przybylski,² pointed out that comprehensive research has shown that games hardly have any effect (1%) on boys or girls (BBC Radio 4, 2015). In addition, if excessive use of technology affects boys negatively, one wonders why the excessive use of social media by girls apparently does not have the same effect.³ Then there was the claim by psychologist Martine Delfos, saying that ISIS executioners have to be gamers as only years of gaming can desensitized a person to such a degree that they have lost all sense of empathy (Kamerman & Speiring, 2015). This unsubstantiated claim is so ridiculous that it does not even deserve a counterargument (see, however, the next example). Finally, there was the American Psychological Association who released a new policy statement on computer games in which they had to acknowledge that violent crimes cannot be linked to violent video games.

That this conclusion did not sit well with the association was shown by their new claim that violent video games do provoke milder acts of aggression. As this claim was again unfounded, the reaction from the academic community was not only critical but also put the association's research integrity in question.⁴

Of course, this is not the first time a new medium has been seen as the root of all evil. All media that we now consider part of our daily lives: radio, film, comics, and television have caused controversy. In fact, the very fact that the medium is new implies that it first has to be accepted. This fear of the new or neophobia is an acknowledged anxiety disorder. In a mild form, it refers to the fear of innovation, i.e. the unwillingness to try new things, to break with established habits. People (but also animals), especially at a certain age, are afraid or reluctant to try new things. Such fears often manifest themselves on a larger scale when a new invention seems to threaten long held habits or beliefs. Usually such a fear of the new literally dies out, because the people who do not embrace or understand the new situation eventually pass away. People have to grow used to the new, until then there will be adversaries who will try their hardest to oppose it often using quite irrational arguments. This is not exclusive to media, we have seen this with the invention of the bicycle, of the washing machine, of the microwave, etc., amenities most of us would not want to do without now.

When the telephone was invented, some people had moral objections because they feared that the invention would lead to less face-to-face contact and thus less communication [sic]. Others were afraid that messages would spill out of the wires when a cable broke or that they

would be electrocuted when they touched the receiver. In one Swedish village, people even believed that the telephone would attract evil spirits (Ehrenkrona, 2007). When film became popular it was seen as an amoral medium not only because people might imitate what they saw on screen (fighting, burglary, murder), the dark setting of the theatre itself was suspect as it might entice the audience to behave inappropriately (Davis, 1976). Now, however, whenever we watch *CINEMA PARADISO* (1988), these misconceptions fill us with nostalgia and mirth.⁵ In 1941, Sterling North's⁶ strongly condemned comic books calling on all "parents and teachers throughout America [to] band together to break the 'comic' magazine",⁷ which started a moral campaign against comic books of which Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), in which he purportedly showed a connection between reading comics and violent behaviour in children, is probably the best known example. Those of us who witnessed the rise of television will no doubt remember that we would all grow up as square-eyed couch potatoes, who would never come to any good because we neglected our homework [sic]. Still, for television that was only part of the problem. In his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Neil Postman argued that television itself would be the death of Culture, referring back to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

Yet, as we have witnessed, new media have arisen remediating abilities that were once unique to television, such as viewing live broadcasts. Consequently, television is now forced to rethink itself, one of the results of which is complex TV,⁸ which forces its audience to keep on their toes (Mittell, 2012). Still, Postman's argument that technology is not neutral does ring true: "Introduce the alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history and

religion. Introduce the printing press with movable type, and you do the same. Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images [TV] and you make a cultural revolution.” (Postman, pp. 162-163). However, that does not imply that such changes are always for the worse. Remember, even the venerated book was once under suspicion: “he so immersed himself in those romances that he spent whole days and nights over his books; and thus with little sleeping and much reading, his brains dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason...” (Cervantes, *Don Quichote*, 1605 trans. 1994).

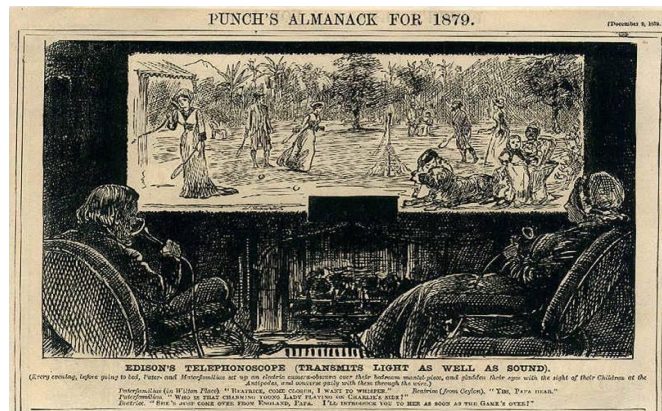


Image 1 New inventions were not only feared but also ridiculed as in this picture from Punch's Almanack⁹

Thus, it was inevitable that computer games would become one of the newer media to come under suspicion, think, for instance, of the Columbine shooting in 1999 or games like *DOOM* (1993) and *GRAND THEFT AUTO* (1997 – present). However, games have been controversial much

longer. In 1976, an Arcade game called *DEATH RACE* was the first game to incite moral outrage on a national (American) scale. The game is said to be inspired by the film *DEATH RACE 2000* released a year earlier. This film shows a car race set in a dystopian future in which the drivers gain points based on speed and the way in which they run down innocent pedestrians. According to American film critic Roger Ebert, “[y]ou get 100 points for someone in a wheelchair, 70 points for the aged, 50 points for kids and so on.”¹⁰

The killings are depicted in the most graphic way possible. Giant swords on the fronts of the cars skewer victims. Others are run over several times.” (27 April 1975).¹¹ What Ebert noted was that the audience loved the over-the-top violence of the movie even though “at least half [of them were] small children” (ibid.). The film was R-rated, so it should have only been accessible to children accompanied by an adult, but according to Egbert, “the vast majority of the kids (and by kids I mean under 10 years old) were without parents or guardians.” (ibid.). To give an idea of what these children saw, here is a sequence of captured shots that take place shortly after the start of the race, where an unsuspecting road worker is maimed before death:



Images 2-4 captured shots first race victim DEATH RACE 2000 (New World Pictures, 1975)

The varied deaths in *DEATH RACE 2000* remind us of the wealth of [hilarious!] cartoon violence, an association that undoubtedly added to the children's' appreciation of the film. However, in the cartoons of the time blood was seldom shown unless it was clear that it was tomato sauce. In comparison, even to cartoon violence, the game looks completely *underwhelming*:

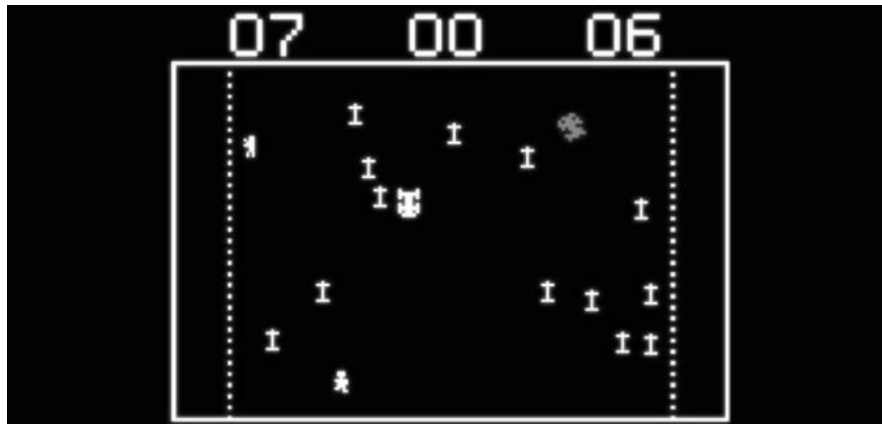


Image 5 Screen capture *DEATH RACE*
The sprites represent cars, "gremlins", and tombstones.

To get a better idea of the game *DEATH RACE*, it helps to look at its manufacturing history. The game was designed by Howell Ivy, cofounder of the company Exidy (short for Excellence in Dynamics). The game called *DESTRUCTION DERBY* was licensed by Exidy to the company Chicago Coin in 1975. They renamed the game *DEMOLITION DERBY* and released it under their own label. When Chicago Coin ran behind on paying the license fees, Howell, wanting to recoup on the investment, redesigned the game:

We licensed that game to Chicago Coin and we were shipping boards to them but they were behind on paying us. So I thought, 'how can I change Destruction Derby [with cars hitting other cars] to make it different so we have another game to put out there?' It's very hard to change the gameplay when a game is done in hard logic but to just change the images, that's not so hard. It was a very early use of PROMs – Programmable Read Only Memory – and I realised I could change the cars to people! When they get run over, well, I can't have a dead body, but how about just a cross? That's how Death Race was born. (Ivy, 2014)

Below the three flyers¹² for the three games are shown. Note that the first (for *DESTRUCTION DERBY*) is quite neutral and even patriotic with its red and blue lettering on the white background. The screen on the cabinet is very colourful as well, predominantly using yellow, red and other primary colours. In comparison, the second flyer (for *DEMOLITION DERBY*) is less cheerful with its cyan background and green and orange cars (secondary colours). The emphasis is on the collision of the two cars, even though the description explains that the cars the player has to hit are drones.¹³

The flyer also emphasises the realistic sound effects "Realistic car crash sounds – Realistic roar of motors". The final flyer (for *DEATH RACE*) is far more sinister, although the text says that you are chasing monsters, the skeleton clearly suggests human beings.



Image 6-8 Flyers for the games *DESTRUCTION DERBY*, *DEMOLITION DERBY* and *DEATH RACE*

In the first months after the release of the *DEATH RACE* cabinet, nothing happened apart from some distributors refusing to contract the game. In fact, the game cabinet did quite well compared to the other Exidy games. That is, until a newspaper in Seattle wrote about the game, an article that was picked up by the Associated Press. This started the ball rolling. The early articles, such as the one published in *The Gettysburg Times* of 2 July 1976 were relatively neutral. In this article, Paul Jacobs, marketing director of Exidy, was recorded saying, “If people get a kick out of running down pedestrians, you have to let them do it”.

Bill Aubbon, director of the Seattle Center arcade was at first not even aware of the game, or any controversy. Later he stated that he was relieved to find out that “those are gremlins that you run down. You're not supposed to think they're people.” However, the article already questioned the human vs “gremlin” argument,¹⁴ to which Jacobs replied, “I don't think people really get off on thinking they ran down a pedestrian. I think they just like to see how good a marksman they are.”¹⁵

The article ends with a response from a Seattle psychologist who had worked with aggressive inmates at California's San Quentin Prison saying that “A game like that appeals to the morbidity in a person [...] That type of pre- occupation with violence was common in the prisoners I dealt with. They would have loved the game....”. These early articles did not have a negative effect as the sale of the cabinets rose. In fact, Exidy saw them as free publicity, (Kent, 2001).

It was not until the National Safety Council reported on the game that all over America newspapers ran articles with headlines such as “Local safety authorities denounce game” (Young, *The Spokesman Review*, 1976), “Pedestrian hunting game called sick, sick, sick” (Bangor Daily News, 1976), “Electronic ‘Killer’ Game Spurned by Area Parlors” (Schiff, *The Evening News*, 1976), “Safety Council Outraged by New 'Death Race' Game” (The Lewinston Daily Sun, 1976) and “‘Death Race’ Game Gains Favor, But Not With the Safety Council” (Blumenthal, *The New York Times*, 1976). The articles all quoted Dr. Gerald Driessen, behavioural scientist and manager of the council's research department, stating that: “One of its most insidious and probably unrecognized characteristics is its shift from imaginary visual images of destruction, as you have in TV violence, to actual behavioural actions taken by the player.”, thus for the first time highlighting the medium specific difference between computer games and other media such as film or television: interactivity, an argument that would crop up repeatedly in later debates about violence and computer games.

Interestingly, according to Steven L. Kent the real point was not the interactivity, which, as Driessen already recognized was probably an

“unrecognized characteristics” but “this little ‘ahhkh’ [scream] when the person got hit, and a little gravestone came up” (quoted in *Gamespot*, 7 March 2004). Kent’s argument is supported by a passage in *The New York Times* quoting Phil Brooks, Exidy’s general manager, “As for the ‘scream’ the game emitted when you ran over a gremlin - that was just a beep.

We could have had screeching of tires, moans, and screams for eight bucks extra. But we wouldn’t build a game like that. We’re human beings too.” (Blumenthal, 1976).

After the newspapers, the game was commented on in NBC’s WEEKEND NEWS show. And CBS’s news program 60 MINUTES did an item on the psychological impact of video games. Again, this did not detriment the sales of the game. It was only after public objection arose, such as the first-ever organized protest¹⁶ led by Ronnie Lamm, at the time president of the Middle Country School District Parent Teacher Association (PTA) council, that the game was banned (Bolger, 2009). This, however, did not deter Exidy from making a sequel. Interestingly, when later recounting her actions Lamm emphasized that they were not so much protesting against individual games, but against the ‘arcades’ themselves:

This is something new, something that parents were embracing, possibly for the wrong reason, and school districts at the time had concern about children cutting out of school to go to [play] video games. But our initial concern was the safety of children in bar lobbies, in luncheonettes. Where were these machines? Were they in the backroom? Were they being watched? Children are hanging out here... What was their supervision? (Bolger, 2009).¹⁷

As already mentioned, another game infamously resurrected a similar premise to that of *DEATH RACE*, *CARMAGEDDON* (1997). This game was definitively inspired by the now cult film *DEATH RACE 2000*. In the game, initially only released for the PC, the player competes against other (computer controlled) race cars in various settings, such as cities, rural and industrial areas. There are basically three ways to win the game: first by completing all the checkpoints and laps, then by demolishing all the other cars, and finally by killing all the pedestrians of that particular level. The game designers have their own preferences as the game manual explains: “you don’t have to take any notice of the checkpoints and laps ... There’s more fun to be had by ramming other cars and mowing down the masses” (1997, p. 3). In fact, almost every page in the manual shows that *CARMAGEDDON*’s designers Patrick Buckland and Neil Barnden wanted to cause as much controversy over the game as possible, as past experience in the game business had shown that controversy was almost a guarantee to boost sales figures. The manual starts with the following dedication:

The founders of Stainless Software Ltd., Patrick Buckland and Neil Barnden, would like to dedicate this game to their wives, Janet and Pauline, and to Patrick’s children, Julianna and Sean, who all suffered from the hours needed to put this product together. However, dedicating something so sickly depraved and violent as this diabolical piece of soul-poison to them just wouldn’t seem a very nice thing to do. (ibid. p. 1).

The game even had a button to make the pedestrians disappear in case “young children, the mentally unstable, or nervous pets” would be around witnessing the gameplay or as the manual states:

We make no excuses for the explicit nature of this game, because we don't believe there is anything wrong with it. However, just to avoid those embarrassing moments when you've just mowed down a pack of innocent hitchhiker's and their livers are cascading around you in a bloodstorm of death – and in walks your 83 year-old mother, all 6 of her great grand-children and the vicar, and the vicar's nervous dog, we've put a panic button in there. (ibid. p 2).

Of course, a more careful reading of this shows that there is a lot of tongue-in-cheek involved. The game was rated M for mature in the US and had an age limit of 18 in the Netherlands. In the UK it was initially banned until the red blood was replaced by green to show that the victims were not humans (Poole, 2000). As in the film *DEATH RACE 2000* the pedestrians you hit have different bonuses, decreasing in value the younger or more able the person is.¹⁸



Image 9 Box graphics



Image 10 Hitting an able adult



Image 11 Hitting an old lady

As is clear from image 10 and 11 during racing there is not much detail of the actual hit, although it is clear that *CARMAGEDDON* has a lot more graphic detail than *DEATH RACE*. However, *CARMAGEDDON* includes an 'instant replay' feature where the action is shown close up in all its gory detail:



Image12 the infirm lady is hit



Image 13 her body parts fly around



Image 14 details of another hit

Still the game was only banned in certain countries, for most countries the game's age restriction sufficed with or without the colour modification. Moreover, although there was some coverage in the news, people no longer protested in large numbers. In fact, the game's name became a synonym for monster traffic jams, especially in the US.

One of the main differences modern day open-world games have compared to *DEATH RACE* and *CARMAGEDDON* is that you can still kill innocent bystanders, but it is not *the* or *one of the* goals of the game. In fact, in most games you are penalized for doing so. Most modern games uphold an accepted moral standard (e.g. killing is only justified if your own life or that of an innocent is threatened, gratuitous violence is frowned upon unless it is clearly cartoon-like as in *ANGRY BIRDS* (2009)). However, even if this is not the case most players want to identify with a hero character and a hero always abides by a moral code. In a recent survey held by Samantha Schäfer among 489 *ASSASSIN'S CREED* players, it was found that some players refused to play the game *ASSASSIN'S CREED ROGUE* (2014), because the game's protagonist Assassin Shay Patrick Cormac switches allegiance and joins the Assassins' sworn enemies, the Templars. Earlier, *ASSASSIN'S CREED III* (2012) already caused controversy because, unbeknownst to the players, their game character (their protagonist) in the first three sequences also turns out to be a Templar.

Games like *BLACK AND WHITE* (2001) and *FABLE* (2004 – 2014) are even more innovative in that they let you explore the concept of good and evil.

However, from personal experience, I can say that it is very hard to make amoral or evil choices consistently. In short, we have come a long way since the first computer game controversy. Nevertheless, as we have seen above, it has not been completely laid to rest. However, more and more people are beginning to realise that one-sidedly blaming the media or a single medium is short sighted. Even erstwhile protestor Ronnie Lamm, who is no longer actively involved in the debate, stresses that games should not be blamed for incidents such as the Columbine shooting (Bolger, 2009).

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¹ See Veugen 2011 'Introduction' for more examples of misconceptions about game demographics.

² Psychologist Andrew Przybylski is a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute. He is an acknowledged authority on computer games and human behaviour. For a list of publications on the subject see his website <http://www.andrewprzybylski.me>.

³ A recent study by the Dutch Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek showed that 14% of girls aged between 12 and 18 spend more than 5 hours per day on Social Media, compared to only 6% of boys in the same age group (NOS, 2015). Interestingly, Andrew Przybylski's 1% also applies to the use of social media.

⁴ For a comprehensive post-mortem of the affair, see Christopher J. Ferguson's recap in the *Huffington Post* blog (2015).

⁵ That life should imitate film is an interesting argument as the saying 'art imitates life' assumes the direct opposite. Also as Alfredo reminds Totò in the film "La vita non è comò l'hai visto nell' cinematografo. La vita è più difficile." (Life is not as you have witnessed it in the cinema. Life is far more difficult.)

⁶ Sterling North is an American author who is especially known for his children's books. In 1941 he was the literary editor of the *Chicago Daily News*. As such, he wrote a very influential article entitled 'A National Disgrace' (North, 1941) in which he condemned comic books as culturally debilitating for young children.

⁷ The debate died down after congressional hearings in the mid-1950s, which led to self-censorship in the industry.

⁸ Modern TV series, especially dramatic series, are complex in the sense that storylines involve more than one episode or even season. They have more than one or two main protagonists and they rely on the fact that episodes can be watched as often as the viewer wants (DVD, streaming). Viewers also watch more than one episode at a time (e.g. NETFLIX releasing all episodes at once) and discuss episodes at length during (*TWITTER*) or after the episode (on the series *FACEBOOK* page or on online fan forums). Consequently not every plot twist has to be shown explicitly or in the TV-series itself (many now have webisodes, twitter accounts, but also related comics, books, or narrative games). Think of series such as *LOST* (2004 – 2010), *THE WIRE* (2005 – 2008), *GAME OF THRONES* (2011 – present), *BLINDSPOT* (2015 – present) and *HEROES REBORN* (2015 – present).

⁹ The Telephonoscope, an early concept of the videophone and the television (and Skype), was not invented by Edison but conceived by science fiction writers and illustrators such as Albert Robida, who already in 1869 drew an illustration of a man sitting at home watching scantily dressed theatre performers dancing (Hunt, 2014). For George du Maurier it was a popular subject, which he depicted more than once, including this image. A transcript of the text can be found in Verity Hunts article referred to in this note.

¹⁰ Of course, there is another game that comes to mind *CARMAGEDDON* (1997). I will come back to this later.

¹¹ Pulitzer award winning film critic Roger Ebert's reviews have been made available online on the website www.rogerebert.com.

¹² These are flyers for the retailers to tempt them to install a cabinet in their arcade.

¹³ Not to be confused with our modern day use of the word *drone*. In the context of the game it basically means the cars that have to be hit. Using the word drone enforces the idea that these are a sort of robot vehicles, not actual cars with drivers.

¹⁴ At the time of development *DEATH RACE* was called *PEDESTRIAN*, but in the flyers and marketing the stick figures were called gremlins, even though they really were thought of as humans as the quotes by Ivy and Jacobs show. In the 2014 interview, Ivy admitted, “We made that spin up on the spot! After all the controversy, we said, ‘look, we’re getting some negative press here so hey, let’s pretend they’re ghosts or gremlins. That’d work!’” (Ivy, 2014).

¹⁵ Actually hitting a pedestrian/gremlin in the game is quite hard, as the player has to avoid objects (such as the tombstones) that appear on the screen while the stick figures can use them as cover. Hitting a pedestrian/gremlin is further complicated by the fact that they are faster than the car the player drives. Consequently, actually hitting one is based on a certain strategy that involves anticipating when a pedestrian/gremlin leaves cover. However, every hit also means an additional tombstone to avoid. *DEATH RACE* is a game of dexterity and that was probably why it appealed to so many, as comments of players at the time show.

¹⁶ There were even rumours of upset parents dragging game cabinets into the parking lot and setting fire to them.

¹⁷ This ‘fear’ and other misgivings parents and teachers had (and sometimes still have) regarding arcades, computers and games is for instance shown in the 1983 film *WARGAMES*. It is also discussed in J.C. Herz’s excellent book *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds* (1997).

¹⁸ For an elderly person with a walker you get 400 points, for an able adult only 100.